1. (Original) A method of permitting only authorized users to use an automated vending machine, comprising the steps of:

providing each of the authorized users with an identification card that contains a digital data code corresponding both to the identity of the authorized user and a biometric characteristic of the authorized user;

providing a vending machine having an identification card reading device and a biometric characteristic scanner;

reading said digital data code from an identification card inserted into said identification card reading device in said vending machine by a potential user;

scanning an actual biometric characteristic directly from the potential user using said biometric characteristic scanner;

comparing the actual biometric characteristic of the potential user to the digital data code of said biometric characteristic contained on said identification card; and

enabling the vending machine if the actual biometric characteristic of the potential user matches the digital data code of said biometric characteristic contained on said identification card and if said digital data code on said identification card indicates that the potential user

is authorized.

2. (Original) The method according to Claim 1, wherein said biometric characteristic scanner is selected from a group consisting of fingerprint scanners, palm print scanners, retina scanners, knuckle scanners and voice print scanners.

3. (Original) The method according to Claim 1, further including the step of providing the vending machine with a money validation system for receiving and validating money from the potential user.

4. (Original) The method according to Claim 3, further including the step of enabling the vending machine only after the potential user has deposited a predetermined fee into said money validation system.

5. (Original) The method according to Claim 1, wherein said vending machine vends a product that can only be sold to potential users over a predetermined age.

6. (Original) The method according to Claim 1, wherein said vending machine vends prepurchased products that are to be dispensed only to a potential user who prepurchased the product.

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7. (Currently Amended)   A vending machine for vending regulated products, said vending machine comprising:

a money validation unit for receiving and validating money;

an identification card reader for reading an identification card;

a biometric characteristic scanner for reading ~~an~~ actual biometric characteristic data from a person standing in front of the vending machine;

a systems controller for enabling said vending machine to vend the regulated products only after a proper fee has been deposited into the money validation unit and data read from said identification card is ~~compared~~ matched to said actual biometric characteristic data read by said biometric characteristic scanner.

8. (Original) The vending machine according to Claim 7, wherein said biometric characteristic scanner is selected from a group consisting of fingerprint scanners, palm print scanners, retina scanners, knuckle scanners and voice recognition scanners.

9. (Original) The method according to Claim 7, wherein said vending machine vends a product that can only be sold to

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potential users over a predetermined age.

10. (Original) The method according to Claim 7, wherein said vending machine vends prepurchased products that are to be dispensed only to a potential user who prepurchased the product.

11. (Original) A vending system, comprising:

identification cards distributed to authorized persons, wherein each identification card contains a digital data code regarding a biometric characteristic that is unique to the owner of that identification card;

at least one vending machine having a card reader for reading said identification cards and a biometric characteristic scanner for ascertaining an actual biometric characteristic of a person using the vending machine, wherein the vending machine compares the actual biometric characteristic of the person using the vending machine to said digital data code on said identification card and vends product only when there is a match.

12. (Original) The system according to Claim 11, wherein said biometric characteristic scanner is selected from a group consisting of fingerprint scanners, palm print scanners, retina scanners, knuckle scanners and voice

recognition scanners.

13. (Original) The system according to Claim 11, wherein said vending machine vends a product that can only be sold to potential users over a predetermined age.

14. (Original) The system according to Claim 11, wherein said vending machine vends prepurchased products that are to be dispensed only to a potential user who prepurchased the product.